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THE STORY OF HOSEA, THE PROPHET, AS IT MIGHT HAVE BEEN TOLD IN CONTEMPORARY CHRONICLES.

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IN imagination let us go back about twenty-seven hundred years, and take our stand near the beginning of the second half of the eighth century before Christ. In a small village among the hills of Samaria is the home of Hosea ben-Beeri. On a certain day of the year—let us say—745 B. C. this village shows unusual signs of excitement. Eager for any gossip, the people push and jostle one another in the gates. Today the interest is not diplomacy, religion, or trade, but social scandal touching one of their most respected neighbors. On inquiry we learn that the news of the day is to be found in the last publication of the *Annals of Jeroboam II.*

CHRONICLE OF THE YEAR 745 B. C.

Story of Hosea ben-Beeri. Great scandal in village life. Gomer bath-Diblain, wife of the well-known and highly honored citizen, Hosea ben-Beeri, has run away with a paramour, leaving her husband and her children to shift for themselves in bitter sorrow and disgrace. Report of an interview with the deserted husband, in which he told his story somewhat as follows :¹

“Ten years ago I met Gomer bath-Diblain, a maiden full of gracious promise, with a comeliness of person only surpassed by the charm of her mental qualities and the loveliness of her character. We loved each other,

¹ Several theories have been propounded to explain the narrative sections of Hosea, chaps. 1 and 3. The arguments have centered about the expression “woman (wife) of whoredoms” (Hos. 1 : 2). Is it literal or figurative? The supporters of a figurative meaning for the phrase hold that it denotes “an idolatrous woman.” The command, then, would mean something like this : “Take a wife from the daughters of the land. She will be an idolater, inasmuch as the whole land has departed from Jehovah.” But the objections to a strictly literal view are valid against this view also ; for idolatry and whoredom were interchangeable terms as early as Hosea’s time, if not earlier.

The strictly literal view is repugnant both to our conception of God and to our thought of his prophet. There is a modified literal view—called the experience

and in great hope for the future we were married.² For a while our home life only strengthened our love for each other, and our joy in each other. Into our home a son was born, whom we called Jezreel ('God sows'). Then it was that there came to me the faintest rumor that Gomer was beginning to worship in our groves, a rumor which grew with each week and month. Then a daughter was born, and I named her Lō-Ruhamah ('Uncompassioned'),³ because of the suspicions which racked my heart. Soon thereafter another son was born; but now the mother's unfaithfulness was a matter of public report, and I called him Lō-Ammi ('Not-my-people'),⁴ a name which sprang spontaneously to my heart and lips when he was born. After Lō-Ammi's birth, the temper of Gomer rapidly crystallized into open infidelity, and she left my home with a paramour. My children are still left to me; and though in utmost tenderness I have reared them, teaching them to walk, carrying them in my arms when tired, nursing them when sick; though I have endeavored to bind them to God, virtue, and myself, by the most devoted love; though I have borne their burdens, suffered with their suffering, and rejoiced in their joys, yet are they children of their mother, and I can only regard their future with great fear at heart.⁵ I love her still, the wife of my youth, and, moreover, she is not altogether to blame for her disgrace. The whole land is drunk with sensuality. Truth there is not, nor mercy, nor knowledge of God. The priests, the appointed dispensers of the knowledge of righteousness, are a snare for an easily duped people.⁶ Our king, though a brilliant conqueror, is grinding the people with the iron heel of militarism.⁷ There

theory—which has much in its favor, and but little against it. This view supposes that at the time the phrase "woman of whoredoms" is used of Gomer—*i. e.*, *post eventum*—she is all that the phrase signifies. Certainly, if Hebrew idiom counts for anything, the expression refers to actual character, rather than to disposition or inclination; and the attempts to soften the harshness of the phrase are due, it seems to me, to the hypothesis that this command of Jehovah was some objective word or message which came to Hosea prior to his taking a wife, and that he must actually look about for a harlot to take into his bosom and bear him children, in order to fulfil God's will. The position of Hosea in time, with reference to the event, is overlooked. Whatever else may be said, when Hosea relates his call to be a prophet, this event and the others, mentioned in Hosea, chaps. 1 and 3, are past. The real character of Gomer and her children is well known—at least to Hosea. Of this experience theory it may be said: (1) It takes a natural and the *prima facie* view of the narratives in chaps. 1 and 3. (2) It involves no grave moral objections. (3) It gives force to the symbolism of chaps. 1 and 3. (4) It lends itself, therefore, to the best understanding of these chapters.

² Hos. 1:3.

⁴ Hos. 1:9.

³ Hos. 1:6.

⁵ These statements are based upon the hypothesis that Hos. 11:1-4 reflects Hosea's love and tenderness as touching his own children. Cf. Hos. 1:2, the expression "children of whoredom."

⁶ Hos. 4:1, 2, 8-10.

⁷ Cf. Hos. 1:7; Am. 2:15, 16.

is seeming prosperity. Wool and flax, bread and oil, corn and wine, gold and silver are abundant.⁸ Our people are religious, but the worship, though conducted in Jehovah's name, is the grossest idolatry.⁹ The hour is dark with evil, and swift and certain destruction is in store for Israel."

Pausing in our reading, and reflecting thereon, we are led to make a careful examination into the condition of things in Israel.

We are near the close of the brilliant reign of Jeroboam II. Success had followed his footsteps. Early in his career he had carried the arms of Israel to the gateway of Hamath on the north, and to the Euphrates on the east.¹⁰ Now the kingdom is enjoying the fruits of victory. The people are giving themselves to agriculture, to architecture, to commerce, and to religion, as never before. Merchants from Nineveh on the east, from Thebes on the south, from Phœnicia and the isles of the sea are jostling one another in the gates of Samaria. Costly stores of all sorts find ready market. Rich magnates build houses of ivory and of hewn stones. In winter they crowd the capital; in summer's burning heat they flee to cottages and pleasant vineyards situated on hillside or by lake.¹¹ They fare sumptuously every day, reclining on "silken cushions;"¹² and on "ivory couches" they loll to the sound of viols, or sleep drunken with wine.¹³ But all this "ease in Zion" had been gained at great cost. The poor had been sold for silver, and the needy for a pair of shoes. The Sabbath is wished past, that operations of trade may go on. The ephah is made small, and the shekel great, and the balances deceitful.¹⁴ The judges take bribes, and there is no one to plead the cause of the needy and just. Religion is without heart, but the people meet regularly to perform their sacrifices. Bethel, Gilgal, and Samaria are centers of religious life and ceremony. Offering after offering is offered to deity, but they delight not the God of Israel, who, through Amos of Tekoa, had said, "I hate, I despise your feasts, and I will take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Yea, though ye offer me

⁸ Hos. 2:5b, 8, 9.

⁹ Hos. 1:2c; *cf.* 4:12-14.

¹⁰ 2 Kgs. 14:25-28.

¹¹ *Cf.* Am. 3:15.

¹² Am. 3:12

¹³ Am. 6:4-6.

¹⁴ *Cf.* Am. 2:6; 8:4-6.

your burnt offerings and meal offerings, I will not accept them, neither will I regard the peace offerings of your fat beasts.”¹⁵ In short, any idea of spiritual or practical religion has disappeared or is fast disappearing. The case of Hosea, when we consider the social life of the people, is representative. Husbands may well look with suspicion at their wives, and wives at husbands; brothers at sisters, and sisters at brothers.¹⁶ A man’s foes are they of his own household. The trouble is inbred in priest and layman, prince and peasant, man and woman, alike. Desire, education, and practice all are one in the abominations which are rife in the land.¹⁷

CHRONICLE OF THE YEAR 745 B. C.—*continued.*

Reign of Jeroboam, fortieth year, month Tammuz, second day. Three months have now passed since we informed our readers of the desolation of Hosea’s home, caused by the desertion of his wife. During this time matters have developed rapidly with Hosea. He has been touched by the divine spirit and has become filled with prophetic intuition. Only yesterday, as the people were gathered within the sacred precincts of Bethel, worshiping, as they supposed, according to the customs of their fathers, the God of high heaven, Hosea appeared among them, and in a startling manner interpreted to them his experience as the call of God to be a prophet. Because that experience was almost universally known, his words had all the more weight. Among other things he said: “My countrymen,”¹⁸ I have no need to detail to you my home desolation and my heart’s grief, through which Jehovah has been leading me. As I meditated upon that experience, in the twinkling of an eye God flashed upon me the meaning of it all. The impulse to marry Gomer was of God, the beginning of the steps by which Jehovah has been making his will known unto me. Bitter, indeed, have been these years of domestic trial and unhappiness, yet through them there has come to me the thought of God as touching myself and as touching you, my brethren. While brooding over my great affliction, a voice as from heaven came to me, saying: ‘Hosea, your desolate hearthstone is but a type of other hearthstones similarly desolated. The impurity in your home has its counterpart in the homes of scores of your brethren. This calamity has overtaken you in order that you may be furnished for the work of communicating Jehovah’s mes-

¹⁵ Am. 5 : 21, 22.

¹⁶ Hos. 4 : 11-14.

¹⁷ Cf. Hos. 7 : 1-7. While Hosea, chaps. 4-14, are later than 745 B. C., we must suppose that the conditions described in these chapters antedate 745 B. C.—at least in many of their elements.

¹⁸ This sermon of Hosea’s may be found in substance in Hosea, chaps. 1-3.

sages to Ephraim. Your love for Gomer still lives. She, a type of Israel, the bride of Jehovah, can be brought back to your home and heart and redeemed from her uncleanness. Go out after her, show her practical love, surround her with your protecting care; then go preach to my people Israel of my forgiving, redeeming, protecting love.' The voice ceased speaking; but I was not unmindful of the heavenly command, and accordingly I went out in search of Gomer. I found her in utter degradation and great misery. I bought her to me for fifteen silverlings and ten bushels and a half of barley. I brought her back to my home and said to her: 'Thou shalt abide for me many days; thou shalt not play the harlot, and thou shalt not be any man's wife: so will I also be toward thee.' The result already promises a new betrothal, a remarriage. On the ashes of our old love has sprung up 'a bright and pure flame.' All this, O my brothers, is but the providential way of leading me to see the great forgiving love of Jehovah for you. You are the unfaithful wife. You go after your lovers, and while Jehovah has continued to love you, and bless you with wool and flax, corn and wine, gold and silver, you, on your part, have been serving Baal with them, all the time imagining yourselves to be true Jehovah worshipers. You say, *Jehovah-Baal*, but in reality you degrade Jehovah and confuse his religion with the sensual nature-worship. The time is surely coming when you will become conscious of your wrong-doing and of God's love. 'You shall abide many days without king, and without prince, and without sacrifice, and without pillar, and without ephod or teraphim.' But in your time of distress Jehovah will speak to your heart. The valley of Achor will become the door of hope. There you will learn wisdom and true service of Jehovah, and, at last, you shall repent and seek Jehovah, your God, . . . and shall come with fear unto the Lord and to his goodness. Jehovah will betroth you to himself 'afresh in love and trust.' He will make a covenant for you with the beasts of the field, and with the fowls of heaven, and with the creeping things of the ground. He will break the bow and the sword and the battle out of the land, and you shall dwell securely. Then shall you know who it is that gives to you the corn and the wine and the oil; him shall you serve, and he shall be your God."

Here our report stops,¹⁹ and the file of the *Annals of Jeroboam II* is broken. What happened, how the worshipers received the messenger and his message, would be matters interesting to know; but we are left to conjecture. That the feeling on the part of the people was one of patronizing indifference requires no stretch of the imagination to believe. Sure it is that no permanent practical results were produced, for when a little later

¹⁹That Hosea, chap. 4, is separated from chap. 3 by several years at least is recognized by all students of Hosea.

other annals continue the narrative of Hosea, the blackness of Israel's moral obliquity is set forth in language that cannot be mistaken.

CHRONICLE OF MENAHEM.

No patriotic man can review the record of the past year without shame and great fear. Seven months ago our great king Jeroboam II died, and with his death departed the strength and military glory of Israel. His son, Zechariah, succeeded him, only to reign six months, when he fell the victim of the conspiracy and assassination of Shallum; and the dynasty of Jehu ben-Nimshi ended. Of Shallum the less said, the better. He had hardly seated himself on the throne, when he, too, became the victim of conspiracy and expired, to give place to Menahem ben-Gadi, a man of some intelligence, but of great energy and shrewdness.²⁰

* * * * *

Hosea again has come before the people, and his message was full of withering denunciation. We herewith give a brief outline of his thought: (1) Israel is utterly corrupt in morals. Swearing and breaking faith, killing and stealing, murder and adultery deluge the land like a mighty flood. The oppression of the nobles, the selfish ambitions of the priests, the licentiousness of the princes, the debauchery of the grandees he passionately described. The crowning feature of all this moral pollution is the abominable nature-worship, the most characteristic feature of which is the prostitution of our women in the name of religion—a religion of consecrated lust, completely subversive of purity in family life, and the producer of moral death.²¹ “Like the (baker’s) oven their heart is ready. . . . All night their lust smoulders, but in the morning it burneth like a flaming fire. They are all become hot as the oven, and they devour their judges.”²² (2) In close connection with the foregoing thought is another, namely, the dissolution of law and order in the kingdom. Anarchy is rife; the nobles override the peasants; the princes delight the king with their schemes of wickedness. The country is torn with the petty jealousies of rival political factions. King follows king in quick succession.²³ In the midst of such a seething whirlpool of iniquity the man of God prays that Ephraim may have “a miscarrying womb and dry breasts,” so that there may be no fresh victims for calamity and misery.²⁴ (3) Again, Hosea denounces the national foreign policy. It is a mad, wild-ass policy. No one knows what will happen next. The leader of one party now from Asshur, or the boss of the other faction now from Egypt, seeks help, osten-

²⁰ Cf. 2 Kgs. 14 : 29—15 : 16.

²³ Cf. Hosea, chaps. 7–10.

²¹ A careful reading of Hosea, chaps. 4–7, will make it clear that these statements are not exaggerated.

²² Hos. 7 : 6, 7a.

²⁴ Hos. 9 : 14.

sibly for the nation's benefit, but really for personal aggrandizement.²⁵ All this means the forsaking of Jehovah, whose name the people lightly take in their oaths and in their religious ceremonies. The prophet calls us back to Jehovah, back to truth, back to virtue, back to brotherly union; for in these things alone is there peace and safety.

CHRONICLE OF THE YEAR 738 B. C.

Reign of Menahem, king of Israel. This day our king,²⁶ to establish himself more firmly in the royal power, has entered into treaty relations with Tiglath-Pileser, king of Assyria. When we reflect on the conditions of this alliance, we conclude that the advantage is all on the side of the Assyrian and that we are simply vassals. But of this humiliation an insensate king and people take no notice. That this has been done in the face of the wisest counsel is clearly seen by the attitude of Hosea, the prophet. It has been his voice which has advocated a manly and straightforward course, and has condemned in scathing terms the policy of our nobles and rulers. In fact, the prophet's personal safety has been in great danger. A fowler's snare has been in all his ways. The rage and spite of the officials have found vent in scurrility. "The prophet's a fool," they say, "the man of the Spirit is crazy."²⁷ Certain it is that Hosea has had enough to make him insane; for his heart beats with an inextinguishable love for his fellow-countrymen, and while he must denounce their sins, yet he yearns for them as a father must yearn for his wayward child. In a recent sermon his tenderness reached heights hitherto unreachd by any messenger of God to man.

"How shall I give thee up, Ephraim?
 How shall I deliver thee, Israel?
 How shall I make thee as Admah?
 How shall I set thee as Zeboim?
 My heart is turned within me,
 My compassions are kindled together.
 I will not execute the fierceness of my anger,
 I will not return to destroy Ephraim:
 For I am God and not man;
 The Holy One in the midst of thee.

* * * * *

They shall come trembling as a bird out of Egypt,
 And as a dove out of the land of Assyria:
 And I will make them to dwell in their houses,
 Saith Jehovah."²⁸

²⁵ Cf. Hos. 7:8, 9, 11; 8:9, 10; 12:1, *et al.*

²⁷ Cf. Hos. 9:7, 8.

²⁶ 2 Kings 15:19, 20.

²⁸ Hos. 11:8 f.

CHRONICLE OF PEKAH.

Reign of Pekah, king of Israel. Recent events have been of great interest to the righteous remnant in Israel. Of far more importance than the political intrigue which is carried on in our capital is the death of Hosea, the man of God, through the treacherous plottings of a lecherous priesthood and a debauched nobility. So the man of God suffers death in behalf of the people's good.²⁹

Hosea's was an unselfish character. His experience was the saddest man could have; yet in it Hosea recognized that his own lot was but a part of a wider experience. And while he knows the burden of his own heart, he understands the sorrow of his countrymen. Accordingly, the sympathy of his great love sends him to preach to a hardened and licentious people a message which made him the butt of coarse jests, the object of evil machinations, and a martyr for the cause of truth and righteousness.

Again, Hosea was a man of tender, noble human love. It would be difficult to find in the annals of men another such heart, or a more noble example of the devotion of the human spirit to the ties involved in home and country. Hosea loved Gomer, and his sensitive heart must have been wrung with severest torture by the disgrace she brought him and by the desolation of his life, when his ideal of womanhood was shattered. But he continued to love her—surely in obedience to nothing less than a divine impulse—and he forgives and restores.

Next, commensurate with this love in the prophet's heart was a courage that endures all things for its sake. Nothing less could have sustained Hosea in the midst of the snares, and the contumely, and the mockings of his countrymen, as he laid bare to them his own life and gave them the message of God. Alone he stood, save for her whom his heart cherished in love, and the God whom he adored, alone in the midst of Israel's darkest hour of sin and impending doom; but unflinchingly he delivered his message of warning and of love.

²⁹ In view of the conditions in the midst of which Hosea lived, and of the antagonism which he must have aroused, a martyr's death does not seem an improbable ending for his life.

Lastly, Hosea was an optimist. He had large faith in God, and a corresponding hope for Israel. He does not seem to have despaired of the final outcome. God's invincible love must triumph, even though the road to that triumph lay for Israel through poverty, bloodshed, dissolution of state by foreign conquest, and exile in a far country. In the end God must speak comfortably to his erring beloved. Jehovah cannot give Ephraim up. And the prophet who knew accurately and well the situation of the kingdom of Israel; who, too, was fully aware that there were no natural grounds on which to base his hopes, preached ultimate peace and blessing. His faith saw between God and Israel a relation of the closest and most intimate character—a relation, too, which, once entered upon, can never be wholly severed. “I will heal their backsliding, I will love them freely: for mine anger is turned away from him. I will be as the dew unto Israel: he shall blossom as the lily. . . . They shall revive as the corn and blossom as the vine. . . . Ephraim shall say, What have I to do any more with idols? I have answered, and will regard him: I am like a green fir tree; from me is thy fruit found.”³⁰

³⁰ Hos. 14:4-8.